

## THE FESTIVALS SPREAD HOLINESS

*Rabbi David Pinto Chlita*

**I**t is written, "These are the festivals of Hashem, holy convocations, which you shall designate in their appointed time" (Vayikra 23:4).

In this week's parsha, we read about the holiness of Shabbat and the festivals. As we know, the difference between Shabbat and the festivals is that Shabbat has existed since the six days of Creation and always comes after the six days of the week, which is not the case for the festivals. In fact it is the Jewish people, specifically the Beit Din, that designates their dates, as it is written: "which you shall designate in their appointed time" (see Rosh Hashanah 24a), meaning that they are the ones who designate them. Hence we conclude the Kiddush for Shabbat with the blessing, "Who sanctifies Shabbat," for it is the Holy One, blessed be He, Who alone sanctifies it. Likewise we conclude the Kiddush for the festivals with the blessing, "Who sanctifies Israel and the seasons," for He sanctifies the Jewish people, and they in turn designate the dates of the festivals.

I have seen in the Torah commentary Sefat Emet by the Gerer Rebbe that the difference between Shabbat and the festivals lies not only in the designation of festival dates, but in something much more profound. The sanctity of Shabbat surpasses human comprehension, which is why the Sages tell us that G-d said: "I have a precious gift in My treasury, and its name is Shabbat" (Beitzah 16a). Shabbat was given to the Children of Israel as a gift, without work or effort required, which is why man needs an extra soul to receive its light. However the festivals are called "holy convocations," for man must convoke holiness and draw it towards him, something that depends on the holiness of Israel. This is what the Gerer Rebbe says.

From here we learn that the holiness of a festival depends on man, who must prepare himself to receive its light. If he prepared himself correctly, he will receive an abundance of holiness. In the opposite case, however, the festival will have no impact on him. The same applies for Shavuot, which depends on the 49 days that precede it. Hence the Torah does not call it "the festival of the giving of the Torah" (Chag Matan Torah), but rather "the festival of weeks" (Chag HaShavuot), for it essentially consists of receiving the Torah, which in turn depends solely on the preparation that precedes it. There is a direct link between the passage dealing with the festivals and the passage dealing with the blasphemer, which appears at the end of this week's parsha. In Torat Kohanim we read, "Why did he curse? When he came to pitch his tent within the encampment of the tribe of Dan, they said to him: 'What right do you have to be here?' He said, 'I'm among the descendants of Dan.' They replied, 'Each man by his grouping according to the insignias of his father's household.' He entered Moshe's court and was found guilty. He

then arose and blasphemed." This is astounding, for not only was he not content with blaspheming, he deliberately blasphemed G-d's Name! How could a man who saw the miracles in Egypt, who witnessed the splitting of the sea, and whose own ears heard G-d saying: "I am Hashem your G-d" – a man who certainly did not participate in the sin of the golden calf, otherwise he would have died alongside the other sinners – suddenly sink to such an abysmal level? How was he not afraid to utter Hashem's Name; even more so, how could he have cursed it?

Before answering this question, let us delve into the gravity of the sin of rage. The person who blasphemed had been irritated by the fact that he had not been shown respect, and this irritation turned into rage. Now the Sages have said, "He who loses his temper, even the Shechinah is unimportant in his eyes" (Nedarim 22b). Here the blasphemer felt that the Shechinah was unimportant, and he blasphemed. Whoever loses his temper is capable of saying or doing things that he would never say or do otherwise, for in his rage he becomes blind to everything before him. In reflecting upon this, I realize that we sometimes get irritated over trivial matters, over meaningless things. I remember that when I was young, a stranger once arrived in synagogue and sat down in someone else's seat. When the latter arrived and saw someone sitting in his seat, he said nothing until the Sefer Torah was taken out. When everyone left their seat to honor it, he took his seat back. When the stranger returned and saw someone sitting there, he said that he had been there before. At that point the other person began to scream, saying that it had been his seat for the entire year, and that today he had simply arrived late. One thing led to another, and their exchange became enflamed with anger, to the point that one person pushed the other while he was holding the Sefer Torah – which ended up on the floor, to everyone's dismay. And it all started from something as trivial as a seat. The stranger could have gone to sit elsewhere, for it wasn't his seat, or the other person could have forgiven him and gone to sit elsewhere to pray that one time. Yet anger ruins everything and drives people out of control. In fact a person's tendency to become angry is what enables us to determine whether we should become friends, for as the Sages have said: "By three things may a person's character be determined...by his anger" (Eruvin 65b).

Indeed, how could the blasphemer in this week's parsha have reached such a lowly level? What caused it? According to what we have said, since he treated the festivals with contempt, without adequately preparing for them, they automatically did not spread their holiness upon him and he did not benefit from the brilliance of their light. Otherwise he would have been strengthened and used these to study Torah. There is a principle which states that if a person does

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not elevate himself, he will inevitably descend and become corrupt. This week's parsha states, "They shall be holy to their G-d, and they shall not desecrate the Name of their G-d" (Vayikra 21:6). If we make no effort to attain a higher degree of holiness in general, and during the festivals in particular, we will end up desecrating G-d's Name and blaspheming. There can be no worse Chillul Hashem.

If we waste our time during the festivals, it means that we have not

## Real Life Stories

### Ten Years in Siberia

It is written, "It shall remain under its mother for seven days" (Vayikra 22:27).

In the book *Kol Bidemama Nishma* (an enlightening story about an observant family living in Communist Russia), the author, Mrs. Berg, describes a grandmother who refused to touch her grandson before he entered into the covenant of our father Abraham.

At the time, circumcising an eight-day-old baby was considered an act of "religious coercion" under Communism (which has since disappeared from Russia). Here's why: Since a helpless baby cannot object to being circumcised, doing so without its consent constitutes an abuse of power. However if a sound-minded adult wanted to circumcise himself, and he was not coerced into doing so, in that case circumcision would not transgress the law because it then became a private matter. Hence Communist lawmakers enacted legislation which required a male to be at least 18 years old and legally independent in order to be circumcised of his own accord.

The author describes the story of an elderly woman who had preserved a spark of faith in G-d and a desire for mitzvot. When her son, who was no longer observant, had a son of his own, she said to him: "If you don't circumcise your son, I won't accept him as my grandson. In fact I won't even touch him, for it's inconceivable that I, a Jewish grandmother, should hold an uncircumcised grandson in my hands."

Out of respect for his elderly mother, the perplexed son told her: "Mother, you can do whatever you think is right, but I won't have anything to do with it and you'll be held personally responsible."

The elderly woman waited for the right moment, which quickly presented itself. Not long afterwards, her son and his wife left for their annual vacation, leaving their baby with her, as they normally would. In her great wisdom, the elderly woman understood what she had to do to be able to hold her grandchild, which was to have him properly circumcised. She quickly summoned a mohel and organized the circumcision. She assumed all the honors for herself: She served as the *kwatter* [the person who carries the child into the synagogue for the circumcision], she sat in the seat of Eliyahu HaNavi, she served as the *Sandak*, etc.

Upon returning from their vacation and finding their baby circumcised, the son was overcome with fear. If the circumcision was discovered during a routine examination at a clinic, the medical staff would certainly tell authorities that his son had been forcibly circumcised! In that case, who knows how he would be punished or where he would be sent! Terrified, he took the initiative and went to the authorities and accused his mother of having acted against his will. The elderly woman was thus accused of an act of religious coercion against a helpless child.

Ironically enough, the judge who presided over the case was also Jewish by birth.

"How dare you inflict such a terrible deformity upon a baby?" he said to her, his face filled with anger.

Without skipping a beat, the elderly woman responded with a tinge of mockery: "You're Jewish yourself, and you have the same 'deformity'!"

submitted ourselves to Torah and that pride prevents us from learning. How can we rectify this? By obeying Hashem's orders and starting to learn Torah. When we submit to words of Torah and the One Who gave them – the Holy One, blessed be He – we will avoid all forms of carelessness. Here too, the blasphemer in this week's parsha did not take advantage of the holy festivals for himself, which is why he descended from his level in an appalling way, to the point of denying G-d when he was found to be in the wrong.

"That's true," he admitted. "But that was before the revolution. With Communist law today, inflicting this upon a baby is a terrible crime."

The courageous woman continued to defy the judge: "Look, the fact that you were circumcised as a Jew hasn't prevented you from becoming non-Jewish like everyone else and acting just like them in every way. That's why I guarantee that my actions won't impede this child when he grows up. And although he's circumcised, he can be as good a goy as you and a full-fledged communist!"

At that point the judge's patience had reached its end, and he responded to the elderly woman with rage: "Why are you feigning ignorance? You'll be sent to Siberia for ten years, and you'll be able to ponder whether your actions have impeded him or not!"

The elderly woman then raised her eyes to Heaven and exclaimed, "Thank You, Hashem, for Your kindnesses toward me. I thought that I might have one or two years of life remaining, but here this judge, may he be blessed, has promised me ten additional years of life in the plains of Siberia! A great thank you to you as well, your honor, for granting me such long life." And with that, all the officials in the courtroom burst into laughter. Even the judge himself, despite being indifferent to her plight, couldn't stop himself from laughing.

Now the elderly woman had an ingenious attorney, and he took advantage of this moment, when everyone's focus was elsewhere, to tell the judge: "Your honor, you can clearly see who you're dealing with here: This is an old woman whose life experiences have left her profoundly disturbed. Have you ever met someone who rejoices upon hearing that they'll be imprisoned for ten years?" The lawyer's argument won out, and the elderly woman received a more fitting "punishment": A two-year suspended sentence.

## Guard Your Tongue

### The Best Possible Advice

Some people become accustomed to committing a particular sin because they think it is permissible. [With *Lashon Harah*] the evil inclination misleads people by claiming that what they are saying is not slander at all, or that the Torah has not forbidden us from disparaging certain types of people, and that on the contrary it's a mitzvah to libel them for certain reasons. In reality, most people fall into the trap of speaking *Lashon Harah* out of ignorance. There is only one piece of advice to rectify this problem, which is to start learning all the details regarding the prohibition against slander until one knows the subject perfectly. This is the best possible advice, and it pertains not only to slander. We can apply it to every mitzvah that we often transgress, to the point of being controlled by the evil inclination in regard to it. We must therefore study the laws of the mitzvah in question in order to extricate ourselves from the control of the evil inclination.

– Sha'ar HaTevunah

### *The Law for the Kohen and the Kohen Gadol*

It is written, “Except for the relative who is closest to him, for his mother or his father” (Vayikra 21:2).

The commentators ask why the verse starts listing relatives beginning with “his mother,” whereas for the Kohen Gadol it starts with “his father,” as it is written: “He shall not defile himself for his father or his mother” (v.11).

The book *Ohr Torah* offers a simple explanation:

The expression, “for his mother or his father” designates a case in which the mother is deceased and the father is still alive. Conversely, the expression “for his father or his mother” designates a case in which the father is deceased first.

In both cases, the text brings a novelty: The regular kohen is allowed to defile himself for his mother, even if his father is still alive and can take care of her burial.

On the other hand, the Kohen Gadol is not allowed to defile himself for his mother, even if his father is already dead and therefore cannot take care of her burial.

### *An Allusion to Prayer*

It is written, “When you slaughter a thanksgiving offering to Hashem, you shall slaughter it so as to be acceptable for you. It must be eaten on that same day” (Vayikra 22:29-30).

According to the book *Toldot Avraham*, this verse is discussing prayer, which must be recited at the proper time because it substitutes for the offerings. Just as an offering must be brought so as to be acceptable, likewise prayer must arise from a sincere heart.

Thus the principle that an offering becomes invalid if eaten beyond a certain time also applies to prayer. The phrase, “You shall not leave any of it until morning” (v.30) also teaches us not to rely on extra prayer to compensate for forgotten prayer. Finally, we must be enveloped with tzitzit and tefillin during the morning prayer, an allusion that appears in the verse: “You shall observe My commandments [mitzvotai]” (v.31) – the term mitzvotai being an acronym for the phrase: Me’utafim Tzitzit U’tefillin Yachdav (“Enveloped with tzitzit and tefillin together”).

### *Body and Soul*

It is written, “You shall afflict yourselves” (Vayikra 23:27).

In his book *Kad Hakemach*, Rabbeinu Bechaye explains that the term *anah* (to afflict) used by the Torah includes the suffering of the body and the soul. The affliction of the body occurs through hunger, and the affliction of the soul stems from evil thoughts, for they have a greater impact on the soul than sin itself. Thus if we afflict our bodies by depriving ourselves of food, but we don’t limit our evil thoughts, we are committing a sin without detracting from the merit of this fast.

Know that this is so, for someone whose life is in danger is exempt from fasting. However a person who wants to engage in a forbidden relationship is prevented, even if it endangers his life. It is therefore clear that the affliction of the body associated with that of the soul constitutes the most favorable and valuable fast possible. This suffering is equivalent to an offering, and its reward is even greater. In fact an offering affects a person’s wealth, whereas a fast affects his flesh and blood.

### *Kedusha*

It is written, “I shall be sanctified among the Children of Israel” (Vayikra 22:32).

The Kedusha found in the prayer *Uva LeTzion* is in Aramaic, and it may even be recited by an individual, meaning privately. However the Hebrew words of the Kedusha proper, which are in Hebrew, must only be recited in a congregation of ten persons or more, because the Shechinah unites with the holy tongue.

It may be objected: “Why must the Kaddish, which is in Aramaic, be recited only in the presence of ten men?”

The sanctification expressed in the Kaddish is unlike [other sanctifications]...for this prayer, the Kaddish, ascends...to every side of faith and breaks down iron walls, weighty seals, and all the kelipot and defenses of evil so that...the Holy One, blessed be He, is more greatly exalted than through any other prayer.... It must be said in Aramaic... and one should respond in a loud voice and with a firm spirit Amen Yehei Shmei Rabah Mevorach in order to quell the power of the other side so that the Holy One may be exalted in His glory above all things. ... Then the Holy One is exalted in glory and remembers His children and His Name. Because of His exaltation, this prayer must be recited in the presence of ten men.

– Zohar II:129b

## In the Light of the Parsha

### *Israel is Delivered Only by Holiness*

***It is written, “Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: Let none defile himself for a dead person among his people” (Vayikra 21:1).***

Why does the Torah use the redundant expression “Speak...and say to them”? We may explain this allegorically by noting that the term *emor* (“speak”) is composed of the same letters as *Roma* (“Rome”). In the future, the wicked civilization of Rome will extend upon the entire world and oppress Israel. Rome is none other than Edom, as the Midrash states on the verse, “Rejoice and exult, O daughter of Edom” (Eicha 4:21): “Caesarea; ‘which dwells in the land of Uz’ – [Rome]” (Eicha Rabba 4:21). Here the Torah teaches us that the only way Israel has to emerge from this exile, the exile of Edom, is to detach itself from impurity.

In this regard the Midrash states, “In the future, all the princes of the nations will come and accuse Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He, saying to Him: ‘Master of the universe, how are the Children of Israel different from the other nations? These are idolaters and these are idolaters; these spill blood and these spill blood; these are immoral and these are immoral. Will these descend to Gehinnom while these do not?’ The Holy One, blessed be He, will say: ‘In that case, let each nation descend to Gehinnom with its gods and examine themselves, and the Children of Israel will also go and examine themselves.’ The Children of Israel will say to the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘You are our hope of escaping, and You are our excuse. We only trust in You. Go before us!’ The Holy One, blessed be He, will respond: ‘Do not fear, you are all clothed with the scarlet of circumcision, as it is written: “She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet” [Mishlei 31:21]’ ” (Midrash Tehillim 1:20).

From here we learn that the Jewish people will be delivered from exile only by separating themselves from impurity and cleaving to holiness.



## *In the Footsteps of our Fathers*

### *Let Him Not Suffer*

The book Kol MeHeichal discusses a fine distinction made by the gaon Rabbi Moshe Shemuel Shapira (the Rosh Yeshiva of Be'er Yaakov) regarding the words "in Whose abode there is joy." These words do not appear in the zimun [invitation] to the Birkat Hamazon for the meal following a circumcision, but they do appear in the Sheva Berachot of a wedding meal. Why the difference? The Halachah attributes it to the suffering of the baby, which is weakened and discomforted by circumcision. Nevertheless, tremendous joy fills the supernal worlds during a circumcision, as it is written: "Great is circumcision, for without it the Holy One, blessed be He, would not have created the world" (Mishnah in Nedarim 31b) and "For circumcision...thirteen covenants were made in connection with it" (Shabbat 132a). The Midrash states that the mitzvah of circumcision is an altar of atonement, for the place where Abraham circumcised himself was established as an altar of atonement for the generations to come. Since he circumcised himself on Yom Kippur, we forever have the merit of being forgiven on this day. Finally, the Midrash affirms that the Jewish people will be delivered from exile due to the mitzvah of circumcision.

It would therefore appear, in light of what we have said, that there must be tremendous joy on the day of a circumcision. Nevertheless, we do not recite the words "in Whose abode there is joy" in the zimun to the Birkat Hamazon. Why? Because an eight-day-old baby suffers slightly and is discomforted. His pain is enough to prevent us from saying "in Whose abode there is joy" during the zimun.

This concept takes on its full significance in this week's parsha with the description of the man who blasphemed Hashem's Name. Even before G-d pronounced sentence on him, it is written: "They placed him under guard to clarify for themselves through Hashem" (Vayikra 24:12). Rashi explains: "They placed him – alone, and they did not leave him with the one who gathered wood, for these two [incidents] occurred at the same time. Now they knew that the gatherer of wood was liable to death.... [Yet] in the case of the blasphemer, Scripture says 'to clarify for them,' because they did not know whether or not he was liable to death." Sifte Chachamim enlightens us here: "If they had been placed together, the blasphemer would have thought that he was liable to death, just like the gatherer of wood. But if he were not, he would have therefore suffered for nothing. Hence they were separated."

### *The Thought Bothered Him*

The following account was given by a student of the tzaddik Rabbi Aryeh Levin:

"When I was young, I studied at the Etz Chaim Talmud Torah in the center of Jerusalem. One night, my parents were surprised to see my Rav standing at the entrance of our home. What happened? As it turned out, earlier in the afternoon I had gone to see Rav Aryeh with a question. Rav Aryeh served as the mashgiach of the Talmud Torah at the time, and he asked me to wait because he was very busy with another matter.

"After waiting a long time and realizing that the Rav was extremely busy, I left. I explained all this to my parents. That same night, we were surprised to see Rabbi Aryeh at our home to find out what I had

wanted to tell him! He had, in fact, been afraid of having wronged me by making me wait for nothing. This thought had bothered him, even though I was only a child!

"Stunned, my parents exclaimed with sincerity and innocence: 'That's why you made an effort to come see our son this evening? You could have waited until tomorrow to find out what he wanted to ask you!'

"However the tzaddik of Jerusalem responded as follows: 'I wanted to reassure your son so he wouldn't be troubled by this, not even for a single night.'"

## *The Faithful Ones - Accounts from the Tzaddikim of the Pinto Family*

### *I didn't Ask Why*

Rabbi David Hanania Pinto once recounted, "During the inauguration of a house belonging to one of my students in Ashdod, one of the participants told us an extraordinary story involving his mother, who lived in Casablanca."

As we know, Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan had lived in Essaouira prior to moving in his later years to Casablanca, where he was also buried. In this city, where 250,000 Jews lived, Rabbi Haim Pinto was known for his tremendous holiness. For example, when he would walk along the street, everyone would rush to greet him and merit to kiss his hand and ask for a blessing. He was a symbol of truth, and his Torah was genuine. Hence G-d spread His holiness upon him and his blessings bore fruit, which is why everyone greatly valued them.

"This woman would go to the market every day to do her shopping, and on her way she would pass Rabbi Haim Pinto and ask him for a blessing. One day the tzaddik asked her: 'Where are you going?' She replied, 'To the market to do some shopping, like always.' However the Rav replied, 'Don't go to the market. Go home and stay there. You can do your shopping this afternoon or tomorrow.'

"The woman didn't ask any questions, convinced that there was a good reason for what the Rav was saying. She therefore returned home. Fifteen minutes later, a neighbor knocked at her door and said: 'Hurry! Go see your daughter. She called and told me to tell you that her husband's head has been injured! It's serious, and he's close to death!'

"The woman then realized that the Rav had told her to return home in order to receive this news. Of course she rushed to the home of her daughter, who said in a frail voice: 'Mama, my husband is dying!'

A few minutes later, he gave up his soul. When Rabbi Haim came to console them during the shivah, the woman asked him: 'Rabbi, why didn't you tell me that my son-in-law would die? Why did you just tell me to return home, without saying anything else?'

"The tzaddik replied, 'Did you want to be distressed before the set time? The suffering you endured was enough!'"

This story allows us to understand the greatness and holiness of the Rav, who by a spirit of prophesy foresaw everything that would happen, but decided to keep quiet so as not to hurt a Jew. He did everything he could to lessen the pain of his fellow Jews.